

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
**Continuing Education Encore Events**

Transcript of  
“Clare of Assisi : From Historical Figure to Sainly Model”

presented on October 11, 2017  
by  
Catherine M. Mooney

Dr. Jane Regan:

And now, it's my great pleasure to introduce our presenter. My good colleague, Catherine M. Mooney, currently serves as associate professor of Church history here at Boston College in the School of Theology and Ministry. And that's a role that she has had since 2001 beginning with Weston Jesuit School of Theology. She holds the M.T.S. degree from Harvard Divinity School, and a master's degree and a Ph.D. from Yale University in medieval history.

Previously, Professor Mooney served as visiting scholar and coordinator of the Gender Studies graduate program at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa, and spent many years teaching at Virginia Commonwealth University. She also served as visiting professor of Franciscan Studies for a year at the Franciscan Institute at St. Bonaventure, New York.

Cathy's written many book chapters and articles and book reviews. She's the editor of a collection of essays which include two of her own, entitled Gendered Voices, Medieval Saints and their Interpreters. She's also the author of two books, the biography of

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was alive, we are in the midst of the most intense and [INAUDIBLE] scholarship about Clare that I think has ever taken place. This Renaissance took off around 1992 and 1993 when the 800-year anniversary of her birth was being celebrated, and it continues unabated today.

In discussing Clare's life tonight in a roughly chronological fashion, I plan to interweave some traditional story lines that have marked the contours of her life with new discoveries and insights, some of which add depth to these traditional depictions and others of which challenge or even upend these earlier understandings. This historical Clare is also fascinating to juxtapose with Saint Clare, the woman who was idealized in text and art after her death.

Now Clare was born in 1193 in the upper section of Assisi where the wealthier families resided. Like many people in the Assisi region, she found the charismatic Francis of Assisi compelling, even captivating.

Let me begin this exploration of Clare with a simple, even trivial sounding question. Did Clare seek Francis out or did Francis seek Clare out? This is one of the many disjunctures we find in literature about Clare. An important legend, or saint's life, that was composed about Clare shortly after her death states that Clare sought Francis out. It wouldn't be surprising. He was becoming rather well-known, she was a young girl still residing at home, and was, well, somewhat known but not so much.

For many years, this legend served as one of the principal sources for our knowledge about Clare. Composed by a Franciscan friar, it exists as one of the principal sources today. It drew many of its facts from the

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they also want to spruce them up. So hagiographers are not beyond embellishing, adapting, or even inventing facts to make their saint look more like a saint. Their principal aim is not to convey historical evidence about their subject, but to convey moral truths that will inspire their listeners and readers.

However it happened, once Clare had indeed been persuaded by Francis' simple message of living poorly and humbly, the two hatched a plan that she would flee from her family's home one night. The sisters who testified said that Clare met Francis at a little church that he loved and often stayed at, the Porziuncola, a church that still exists today, albeit, it has been encased within a larger church to protect it from the weather.

They reported that Francis then tonsured Clare, cutting her hair in a ritual act that signified her commitment to religious life. The legend author added, probably to fend off accusations of impropriety, that Clare met not only Francis, but also his friars. And you'll note that the previous slide had showed Clare being accompanied by several female and one male guardian, although the earliest sources state that she was accompanied by one companion.

Soon thereafter, Clare took up residence in San Damiano, a little church that Francis had been repairing outside the walled town of Assisi, here pictured in a later and expanded architectural configuration.

The traditional narrative about Clare has it that with that move to San Damiano, Francis, together with Clare, founded the religious order that would become known in her lifetime as the Order

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Rather than many dozens of houses being under this or that bishop, Cardinal Ugo wanted them all to be directly under the control of the papacy. The pope agreed. Cardinal Ugo then drew up a document legislating how the women were to live. First called a form of life, it was indeed a rule and Ugo himself who would later refer to it as a rule. And thus began the very first religious order of women that was under the direct control of the papacy.

Note, this papal order began about seven years after Clare had taken up residence in San Damiano. It was also not named the Order of San Damiano, but went by several titles, including the Order of Poor Ladies, the Order of Poor Nuns, and especially the Order of Poor Enclosed Nuns.

How then, later, did Clare and her religious house become involved in this order, the Order of Poor Enclosed Nuns? Cardinal Ugo was doing all he could to promote and expand the new women's order and he looked for a way to grow its cache. He also happened to be an admirer and an advocate for Francis of Assisi and his friars.

In 1218, when the women's order was launched, Francis and his friars—which simply means brothers—were not yet a recognized religious order. In fact, Francis initially did not start out to find an order of men, but with men joining him by the hundreds, he was urged to write a rule that would found what would become known later as the Order of Lesser Brothers, the people we identify as Franciscan friars.

Now, Francis was more of a charismatic figure than an institutional legislator. He inspired others with his preaching and his personal example of poverty, but he proved to be a reluctant administrator. The first rule he wrote captures his lyrical passion. It was also meandering. It included exhortatory language more appropriate to a sermon than a rule. It lacked many legislative points expected of a rule. The papacy rejected it. With help from others, including a canon lawyer, Francis wrote a more succinct, administratively precise rule that the papacy approved.

Years later, Cardinal Ugo, who by then had become Pope Gregory IX, said he was involved in this process and that he was the person who got the papacy to approve that second rule. Ugo, now Gregory, would have known, of course, of Francis's foundation of San Damiano and his patronage of Clare. Clare herself was gaining more admirers in Assisi and the surrounding region. Scholars believe that Ugo wanted Clare and San Damiano to become part of the women's papal order to burnish the order's credential. So this is—now I'm back in a period that is still prior to him becoming pope.

Francis's halo cast its light over Clare and Clare's halo, Ugo hoped, would cast its light on the papal order, enticing yet more women's independent houses to join it. When San Damiano became part of the papal order is not entirely certain. But we know that at least by 1221—that is, about 10 years after San Damiano was founded and three years after the papal order began—Ugo had sent San Damiano a copy of his rule. And in letters to various communities, San Damiano was listed first, as we see here in this slide.

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Not long before her death, Clare recalled within a rule she helped write, and I'm quoting, "in order that we, as well as those who were to come after us, would never turn aside from holy poverty, the poverty we'd embraced, shortly before his death, Francis repeated in writing his last wish for us. He said, 'I, little Brother Francis, wish to follow the life and poverty of our Most High Lord Jesus Christ and of his Most Holy Mother and to persevere in this until the end. And I ask you, my ladies, and I give you my advice, that you live always in this most holy life in poverty and keep careful watch that you never depart from this by reason of the teaching or advice of anyone.'"

This rule was submitted directly to the papacy. And this was not a throw-off rhetorical flourish Clare entered into the rule, but her blunt message to all that San Damiano would continue to hew to Francis' s radical religious poverty, making themselves vulnerable to both personal and corporate insecurity. Moreover, in this same rule, Clare flatly stated that she and her sisters had promised obedience to Francis. Gregory, who respected Francis, probably also feared him.

As Francis' s first biographer wrote after Francis' s death, but with Clare still alive, there were so many signs of sanctity marking Francis' s life that, and I qicorp,3(ar)-Cq sar-.3(l w)10.7(a-0.7(6.4( wic)M4y)7(t(l ik)4.3(e)-5(a3( m)-th)7(tly

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And lest we think that only the well-known and relatively powerful Clare and very powerful Agnes of Prague, who came from royalty, engaged in this tussle with Church authorities, there is evidence that other monasteries sympathetic to Clare's vision did their utmost to emulate its poverty. A case in point is the monastery of Monteluce. Around the same time Clare wrote the above letter to Agnes, Gregory was securing the Monteluce nuns' monastery. They had formerly once won, for a time, a privilege of poverty. He was securing them then with profits generated by an indulgence, with gifts of property, and an exemption from paying a tithe on land he had given them.

But about that time, it seems that the nuns wished to return to a life of greater poverty. Gregory shot off a letter to them forbidding them in stark language not to sell or otherwise dispossess themselves of any property without explicit papal permission. We know, too, that he was sending similar warnings to other women's monasteries. But in a stunning turn, the Monteluce nuns proceeded to get rid of some of their property without the requisite papal permission.

How do we know this? Well Gregory's successor as pope, Innocent IV, sent a letter to a bishop ordering him to recover the nuns' property and to forbid them from disposing of any more property in the future. Had the nuns openly defied Gregory's mandate? Had they openly defied him while he was still pope? It's possible. It's also possible that they had waited until his death in 1241 and liberated themselves of their possessions during what is known as a papal vacancy, which refers to the period between one pope's death and the next pope's ascension to the papacy. In this case, that would be Innocent IV's election, and I've tried to graphically display it here; it was a long vacancy. It lasted 46 years and 3 months and 10 days.





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It's important to Clare —the rule and its approval —is signaled by the fact that, like privilege of poverty, Clare's sisters of San Damiano were able to preserve intact the very parchment upon which the rule appears. And it exists to this day in the sisters' monastery in Assisi.

After Clare's death, the narrative about her life quickly changed. Canonized in 1255, the now Saint Clare was presented to the world in an official biography that significantly domesticated many of her struggles. It included forthrightly her tiff with Gregory IX when she refused to accept property and instead gained the privilege of poverty for her House of San Damiano. My research so far suggests that this clash was memorialized in the legend about her in part because the man who had become pope just after Clare's death but before her canonization, a man who had worked for Gregory, had himself some disagreements with Gregory and thus perhaps he didn't mind including Clare's clash with Gregory.

This pope, Alexander IV, was a man who had worked for Gregory, had himself some disagreements with Gregory and thus perhaps he didn't mind including Clare's clash with Gregory.

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in the 16th century. Clare has become an alter Maria, another Mary or a second Mary, much as Francis in the early 14th century had become the alter Christus, the second Christ.

Now, as exalted as the Virgin Mary is, this is something of a downgrade for Clare who thought of herself as a follower and an imitator of Christ, who is, after all, God, whereas Mary, whom Clare also loved, is God's human mother. Note as well that the Clare in this Madonna of Mercy Fresco

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insightful, critique me, come up with a question that's challenging , or argue, and then we'll come back and we'll have a discussion altogether.

Participant: So we read Saint Francis' s earlier rule for a class and in it, the rule spoke about avoiding women essentially like the plague m like in the language you mentioned that had been added to his image. But this was actually his, I think it was his second rule. But yet he had this really beautiful, spiritual relationship with Clare. So is that something that was added as well to his image or where did that come from, given his . . .

Dr. Mooney: Well, if you look again at that rule and at the second rule, both rules, the first that was not papal ly approved, written in 1221, and the second papal ly approved rule in 1223, each has a passage that's somewhat similar , cautioning the friars not to let women make vows of obedience to them. It doesn't say anything a bout avoiding women like the plague. But he is cautioning them about creating more linkages with women. Francis accepted the linkage between himself and his friars in San Damiano, but he doesn't say anything overtly against women.

And let me just point to another passage, I'm not sure if it's in both rules or just the later rule. But he has a passage about friars —and I will be paraphrasing because I don't have this memorized—saying that friars who get involved in a scandal of some sort, and one presumes he's talking about sexual scandal with women, are to be dismissed. What I find interesting about Francis in that passage is often in this time when men fell into temptation, the temptress was a woman and the women somehow get blamed, much as it even happens today. How was she dressed? Francis doesn't do that.

So when I search for Francis' s writings to see, well, is there truth that he had some kind of over against vis a vis women —maybe I don't want to use the strong word, misogyny —I don't find the evidence. It doesn't mean it couldn't be true but it's not in his writings, it's not in the earliest L ives written about him, it only comes to the fore around the time of this second L

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Who was Elias? Elias was minister general after Francis. He was one of Francis' s early companions,



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identify with Eastern Christians in which human beings are divinized. Early Church fathers like Athanasius made statements like, "God became human so that humans could become God." It sounds blasphemous to Western ears because we're really big on the Fall and sin and punishment.

I'm not saying sin doesn't exist, et cetera, et cetera. But the Eastern Christians, and I see now more and more in subtler ways in some Western writers like Clare of Assisi, that they, too, see this possibility of growth into something that's beautiful, something that's full love, a love so powerful that one is mimicking becoming Godlike. And remember, orthodox Christian theology teaches that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God.

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on the rule, especially with these quotes that I shared. But I think it's to kind of set the record straight that her becoming the sole author is a pretty recent phenomenon and I hope I'm going to turn the tide on that. tht.